LEAVING SHAKESPEARE

GAYLE GREENE

It's by no means clear what a girl like me, coming of age in the California suburbs in the 1950s, was doing with Shakespeare. When I think about high school—the homecoming games and proms, the local drag strip we cruised searching for action, the Mel's Drive-In where we hung out, boy-crazy, clothes-crazy, decked out in crinoline petticoats, charm bracelets, bobby sox, ponytails—it seems a bizarre and eccentric attraction. It was an affair of the heart, I know that: for me, anything interesting or worth doing, anything that makes me do real work—is about love. Not all my loves have been happy or productive, though—far from it: in fact some of the strongest have been tormented and destructive. This thing with Shakespeare—what was it?

I'd been intrigued by Hamlet in high school, but it wasn't until my freshman year at college that I was really bowled over by a Shakespeare play—Richard II. I was barely seventeen, at the University of Chicago, homesick and lost, and I read Richard II in a humanities course. Though this course had little to do with Shakespeare, or with much of anything else as far as one could tell, when I heard the language, really heard it, it was like a spell. I was hooked, caught, cathected, transfixed by that spectacle of ruined royalty, entranced by that sweet sound. I suppose there was something in Richard's adolescent self-pity that validated my own: I too was ready to sit upon the ground and tell sad stories of the death of kings, sure as I was that all was vanity, and certain, also, that I'd been deprived of a birthright—what else could explain my unsatisfactory existence? I was not as critical of Richard as I'd later be, though I was not completely uncritical of him either—I sensed even then affinities between his problems and my own. I had read other plays, but it was Richard, Richard, that ravished me, that struck a chord so deep that it drew me back again and again.

When I think about what else drew me to Shakespeare in those early years,
I recall Laurence Olivier, stunningly blond and anguished in black tights; James Mason, looking distant and Roman in a toga: all that tortured nobility, so tragic, so eloquent—so male. I thrilled to Mark Antony’s pronouncement over the body of Brutus, “this was a man” (5.5.75), and to Hamlet’s words to Horatio, “give me that man that is not passion’s slave, and I will wear him in my heart’s core, ay, in my heart of heart, as I do thee” (3.2.72). It didn’t occur to me that all this homosocial intensity was obliterating me: the men were grooving on the men and so was I, and it took me years to notice my own absence—such was my alienation from my experience. It was years before I thought about the women in the plays, riveted as I was on those dazzling men, and then it was only working on *The Woman’s Part* that succeeded in focusing my attention on them. I suppose falling in love with those heroes was a version of falling in love with movie stars, which I did plenty of in those days—except that it was a more respectable passion, one that I sensed might get me further than a crush on Jimmy Dean. Doubtless that attraction to anguished and inaccessible masculinity was about my father, always a powerful and disturbing presence, or absence, in our so-called family, someone I hadn’t a clue how to think about.

Our family went through what a lot of families in the suburbs in the fifties were going through—that suburban loneliness you could die of, that sense of not being connected anywhere, to anything. But our loneliness was exacerbated by my parents’ unconventional arrangements and their politics. We were not a happy family: my parents were always in the process of separating, and when I was ten, they finally did, leaving my mother that most miserable of anomalies, a woman alone in the suburbs in the fifties, in her forties. My father was mainly away, even when he was around, and he was a womanizer, a philanderer, who was nevertheless oddly devoted to his children and in other ways a nice guy (it took some talent not to get rich as a doctor in those California boom years, but he was an old-style G. P. who didn’t insist on collecting payment when his patients were poor, which they often were). He was Jewish, my mother was not, and when the marriage finally came apart and she changed our name, I was completely confused—I became aware of being Jewish at precisely the time it was denied that I was Jewish, whatever “Jewish” meant. Also, at the height of McCarthyism, my parents were lefties, the few friends they had living under shadows, some blacklisted; yet my parents didn’t identify wholeheartedly with politics either—we were lefties and not lefties. We were quite simply without the consolation of any kind of group identity, even oppositional. In those years when everyone was conforming and when, as an adolescent, I wanted nothing more than to belong, conforming was never an option,
since I’d been taught so thoroughly that everything out there—the ideology of happy families, of a greater America—was fucked. We were rootless, headless, godless, adrift, and there seemed no way of conceiving of alternatives, no way to imagine any other way of being or living.¹

I turned, for a sense of other possibilities, to reading. But what I found there was not very helpful: the “ tiresome, hysterical pretentious Jewess” of Durrell’s Justine; Caddie of Faulkner’s Sound and the Fury, “doomed and knew it”; Hedda Gabler, fatally fixated on the pistols of her father the general; doomed Brett; doomed Gudrun—all male-authored except for Scarlett O’Hara, whose spunkiness I found irresistible, but who also turned out to be doomed. I found myself, disastrously, in Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina. God knows why they were a comfort, these intense, fragile creatures living at the edge of experience—I suppose it was all that exquisitely expressed anguish: they did their despair so beautifully. I was also drawn to the women of Austen and Eliot, who had more interiority and were occasionally even allowed to survive, but I found their happy endings unlikely; I didn’t mind the idea of marriage to Mr. Knightley, but it seemed implausible. By now we know about those death and marriage plots, where they get us, but at the time, in my teens and twenties, this was all there was.² The books I needed—the feminist fiction and theory that would help me make the connections between the confusions I was living through and something out there—were only then being written, and it was decades before I would find them (Martha Quest was published in 1952, The Golden Notebook in 1962; The Second Sex was translated into English in 1953. I did not read these until the late sixties).

There was never any doubt that I would study literature: it was the only thing I’d ever really—wholeheartedly, unequivocally—loved. I muddled through two undergraduate majors, in English and comparative literature, fulfilling requirements that didn’t make much sense (it never occurred to me that they should be making sense), living in terror that the computer would spew me out at the last minute and keep me from graduating. (I had transferred to Berkeley my sophomore year, on account of a boyfriend; by October we’d broken up. This ought to have taught me more than it did.) I never got to know a professor, I never had a woman professor in the five years it took to the M. A., and “woman writer” wasn’t a category in the curriculum. But in spite of the Berkeley English Department I continued to love reading, and in spite of two dreadful Shakespeare lecture courses I elected to take a senior seminar in Shakespeare, where, turned loose on a play of my choice, I turned to Richard, Richard again, and sunk once more into that sweet despair.

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To this day, I don’t know whether the decision to go with Shakespeare rather than the novels I lived on was a bad or a good choice—whether it was a choice that reflected (as many of my choices did) alienation from my deepest needs, or whether it actually expressed my deepest needs. Shakespeare seemed to be something I very badly needed to do, since when I found myself at Columbia a few years later (a move which was not, I’m happy to say, precipitated by a man), where I was surrounded by exciting activity in the nineteenth century and a vacuum in the Renaissance, it would have made more sense to work on the novel than to persist in a Shakespeare dissertation, which turned out to be self-directed. (No one wanted to touch it—the resident Shakespearean said it was “too modern and psychological” and that I “couldn’t possibly master all the scholarship” and the resident Miltonist was afraid of offending the resident Shakespearean—though he eventually did read and rubber-stamp it and set up a defense committee and smuggle me out the back door.) It now strikes me as stubborn and perverse to have persisted in doing Shakespeare with everyone advising against it. Perhaps it had to do with Steven Marcus scaring me off George Eliot by naming every German philosopher she’d ever read and assuring me that I’d have to master all of them to write on her. Mastering the Shakespeare scholarship seemed like a piece of cake by comparison (and from what they all said, the dissertation was about “mastery”). Or perhaps there was a lurking fear that working on a woman writer would make me second-rate. Or perhaps it was a deeper fear of those doomed, desperate women that drove me away from those novels I nonetheless devoured.

I now think that my determination to work on Shakespeare had to do with power. Not in any simple or obvious way—not in the way E. M. Forster’s Leonard Bast or Rita in the film Educating Rita latches on to culture as upward mobility. More in the sense of identifying with the male, wanting to be my father. The thing is, our family was so marginal, and I was on the losing side even of it. I knew I didn’t want to be my mother, an abandoned wife, without resources, dependent on a man. Although she had stayed with us children, and although she was the more attractive of my parents, I felt complimented when people said I looked like my father: he was the doctor, he had the Yale degree, he had position, power, women—freedom; she had us. So it was inevitable that I identify with him, and perhaps also inevitable that I work on Shakespeare. Mind you, my father was never even remotely impressed by my doing graduate study in literature—“In all that time you could have been a real doctor” was his comment when I finally got my Ph.D.—so working on Shakespeare wasn’t in any obvious way about pleasing him. It was just that I felt that doing Shake-
Shakespeare would in some way validate me, would prove I was an intelligent person—and I had a fierce need to prove myself an intelligent person. One of the sad ironies of my life is that I expend enormous energies trying to get the attention of people who turn out not to have been looking, over what turns out not to have been the point.

But there was power of another sort that Shakespeare seemed to offer: it had to do with order, with the edifices built by his language, structures I found shelter in—his works seemed a tower of male strength, what Mrs. Ramsay calls the "admirable fabric of the masculine intelligence" (Woolf 159). I suppose it was understandable, given the shifting sands of my childhood, that I’d flee anything resembling postmodern uncertainties and seek a solid place. Oh, it was always already crumbling, this place, I knew that—that was part of its fascination. But it still seemed to represent something more certain, more clarifying, than anything around me, than the prospects of growing up female in the fifties, than the misery of my mother as she whittled herself down to the confines of her life. I’ve sometimes wondered how much my attraction to Shakespeare had to do with those wasteful, tormented affairs that consumed large parts of my twenties, thirties, and yes, even forties, where I sought validation in brilliant, articulate, narcissistic men who turned out to be using me to validate them, for whom I functioned mainly as an admiring audience. Still, as painful as much of that was, I did not make the usual mistakes: some sort of conditioning that was marching my friends—compulsively and often disastrously—through the steps of marriage, motherhood, divorce, seemed to have been left out of me. Though I thought I wanted to marry (someday, someone, never now), conventional domestic arrangements held a kind of horror for me—houses, entrapment, babies. I did feel an occasional twinge of envy for the matching dish sets and stemware of my married friends (this was how you could tell those of us who “lived together” from those who were married, in the middle classes in the sixties—by our mismatched dishware), but they didn’t seem worth the price, those dishes.

One thing I knew, nothing was as it was claimed to be—and for this, I found corroboration in Shakespeare; for always in his plays, though I was drawn to the grandeur, the splendor, I was driven to ferret out the soft spots—to find the rifts and cracks in the structures. What fascinated me about Richard and Brutus and Othello was the way the fine language masked insecurity, the way those dazzling talkers used words to cheer themselves up, to shore up their realities, while in fact their self-delusions left them wide open to self-deceptions and the lies of others. The thing is, I always knew that people lied: the
happy fifties masked insanity, a suicidal military stockpiling—the war in Vietnam came as no surprise, though what did surprise me was that people imagined their protests might halt it (this early cynicism combined with shyness to cut me off from sixties activism in a way I now regret). I always knew that my father lied, but, more importantly, I knew that my mother lied—in pretending to be okay when she was really coming apart, in telling us to love our father when she hated his guts, in trying to inculcate virtues of love and loyalty in us from a situation that travestied them. So I went for and found in Shakespeare’s plays confirmation of my deepest sense of reality—that words were unreliable, that people could build facades and get trapped behind them, could get confused and ensnared by their own stories. I wrote on this, obsessively, in Richard II, in Julius Caesar, in Othello, in Troilus and Cressida. I was struck by the pairings of words against words—Richard and Bolingbroke, Brutus and Antony, Othello and Iago—winners and losers differentiated by their ability to wield words. I eventually wrote my (self-directed) dissertation on Julius Caesar and discovered that Shakespeare had homed in on something very big, as he so often does, and was intuiting a cultural moment—no less than the revolution in attitudes toward language that was occurring from the medieval to the modern world, the transition from sixteenth-century belief in language and rhetoric to seventeenth-century skepticism, nominalism, and the plain style.

I guess, in an odd way, “mastering” the master was a way of incorporating his power, harnessing (if not exactly understanding) some of the forces that were driving me, demystifying some of that male mystique. I think what I really needed was time and a safe place from which I could take stock—of myself and possibilities—before I could see what I needed to do next. Shakespeare gave me this. I got tenure off him, developed skills of writing and editing, used him to explore certain questions. I learned from him the way language functions in constructing identity and how this process has social (if not political) implications; I learned about systems (value systems, social systems, philosophical, epistemological, and aesthetic systems) and how at times of stress these are prone to come apart; and I learned a lot about power from him—and long before new historicists or poststructuralists or deconstructionists were naming these issues. His plays corroborated my sense—gleaned from a life on the margins—of the contingency of systems and the arbitrariness of convention, of language as a code to be broken: all of which turned out to be fundamental to feminism. I learned what I needed for my next move, to feminist theory and fiction, and when I learned this I left him.\(^3\)

I now work on Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Margaret Laurence, Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Paulè Marshall—contemporary
writers whose novels include me and speak to me as no other literary works do, and whose protagonists survive, often alone, to tell their tales. The route I've taken, from a canonized male writer to women writers, has been traveled by other feminist scholars—in fact it describes the trajectory of feminist scholarship, which began with the study of the canon and shifted to the study of women writers. I think for me it was related to recognizing the influence and importance of my mother, accepting my mother in me, realizing that it was okay to be her. It took me years to figure out that though my mother never finished a degree, she was really the smart one, the strong one, in ways that counted. It took me years to understand that I could never be my father, and more, that I didn't want to. I think this was necessary before I could turn to women writers with a sense that I wasn't doing something second-rate—could approach them with the love and intensity that I'd first brought to Shakespeare.

But in a way, Shakespeare has been the most lasting and stable relationship I've ever had with a man. It was a connection, a kind of wonder, a sort of faith—and faith was something sorely lacking in my life. Probably it was faith in some things I'd have been better off not believing in, but I wouldn't have traded it for a wilderness of critical theory: I wouldn't have wanted my Shakespeare parcelled out in little "isms"—poststructuralism, new historicism, cultural materialism, Marxism, no, not even feminism. It seemed to offer something beyond what was available to me as an adolescent going through a confused coming of age in a demoralizing decade, and though I probably stayed with him too long, as I tend to do in relationships, it made certain things possible.

It may also, of course, have made other things impossible. Perhaps it did keep my lid on when it should have been blowing off—the study of literature did tend to produce political zombies in those days; perhaps if I'd written that George Eliot dissertation, I'd have found a faster route to feminism. I know that it took Simone de Beauvoir, Doris Lessing, Sheila Rowbotham, Juliet Mitchell, Kate Millett, Shulamith Firestone, and Adrienne Rich to show me the connections between the roles my mother and father had played out and the social and political structures out there in the world; it took feminist theory and fiction to make me understand the sexual politics of my interactions with lovers, professors, advisors (yes, even Shakespeare)—to make me see that the political was personal and was what hurt.

My mainstay writer now is Doris Lessing, and I know exactly why. What draws me to Lessing is her articulation of the problems of women and men in our time and her illumination of connections between those problems and the times; her ability to pierce the veil of hypocrisy, the veneer of official versions,
and to deconstruct systems (colonialism, capitalism) and to demonstrate (my old theme) that "listening to the words people use is the longest way around to an understanding of what is going on" (Ripple 7). Here were women—Martha Quest, Anna Wulf—who were not only facing the sorts of problems I was facing, struggling with their sense of themselves, with commitments to work and to men, but who corroborated my deepest sense of reality: that the most important conversation going on is not usually the one that is being verbalized, that the "small ironical grimace" is what signifies—"you have to deduce a person’s real feelings about a thing by a smile she does not know is on her face, by the way bitterness tightens muscles at a mouth’s corner" (Summer 62, 1).

Here was confirmation that if I was inhabiting "another room" (in Lessing’s term), so too were others. It was, of course, the women’s room, where the women were—at least the women I knew, who had always been having another conversation, inhabiting another culture, and whose relation to the dominant culture was just then being articulated by feminist theory. I still turn to books for validation—I think most people who study literature do—but it is validation of another sort, that has less to do with the "male approval desire filter" and more to do with—what? Something closer to, something more like, what I can only call a center. Something less mediated by the law of the father.

But sometimes when I turn a corner I’m still surprised to find Shakespeare there, in places where I least expect him. When Lessing wants to intimate the existence of something wondrous at the end of The Four-Gated City, something miraculous that’s survived the wreck of the world, she takes us to an island rich and strange and evokes the sound of a flute; when Drabble wants to suggest something infinitely mysterious, ineffable, and sad at the end of The Radiant Way, her language evokes "such stuff as dreams are made on"; and when Margaret Laurence wants to show the heroine of The Diviners growing into her own powers, she has her develop from a sense of herself as Miranda to a sense of herself as Prospero. When I find him there, in the hearts and minds of the women writers who are now my greatest loves, I feel that those years were a growing toward something I could have neither predicted nor resisted.

NOTES

1. Piercy captures this “isolation and dead-endedness” of the fifties: what was “lacking” was “a sense of possibilities”; “there was little satisfaction for me in the forms offered, yet there seemed no space but death or madness outside the forms”; “nowhere could I find images of a life I considered good or useful or dignified”; “I could not make connections” (208, 215, 207).

2. I did not realize it, but I was not alone in seeking in fiction for the meaning and connections missing from my life: Doris Lessing, Margaret Drabble, Gail Godwin, Marge Piercy, and Erica Jong write of characters growing up in these years who turned to reading this way.

3. It wasn’t this simple, of course. I am omitting a good deal, making it all sound much clearer and cleaner than it was. I am leaving out the pain and confusion and loneliness—what it was like to be plodding through a Ph.D. program with the certainty that what awaited me at the end (in the mid-seventies) was unemployment; what it was like to be buffeted by those strong sexual attractions against which there seemed no defense, that cooperated with the coldness of Columbia to leave me feeling unfit for life, let alone able to imagine a future. Perhaps this is what narrative does, looks back from an end and selects the steps leading to that end; or perhaps that pain is the subject of another story. The truth is that both stories are true—that despite the anguish of those years, there was this thinking, writing being struggling to survive and make sense of it. I write, therefore I am. Of course there was also a lot of luck (though there was a lot of bad luck too), and a lot of white middle-class support to fall back on—financial, even emotional, from a family that, despite its fuck-ups, had a way of coming through.

4. Which “instructs by quiet magic women to sing proper pliant tunes for father, lover, piper who says he has the secret.” Honore Moore, quoted in Miller (36).

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